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On the road, radio with Garrison Keillor

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What is it about public radio personality and storyteller Garrison Keillor that turns people out in great numbers to buy his books and listen to his radio show?

Just what is the nerve he touches with his low-key style and his tales from Lake Wobegon?

Don't bother asking Keillor, because it's one thing he definitely does not want to talk about.

"Not only do I not want to answer or even think about that question, but I would run in the opposite direction anytime someone wanted to explain it to me," Keillor said in a telephone interview from New York, where he currently lives.

Whatever that special something is, he'll bring it to the Tennessee Performing Arts Center at 5 p.m. Saturday in a live, nationwide broadcast of the *American Radio Company*, co-sponsored by WPLN-FM 90.3, Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, BMI and TPAC.

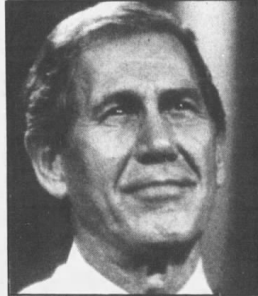
Guest performers on the show, which is heard on 210 public radio stations around the country, will be Chet Atkins and Roger Miller.

All the market research in the world cannot pinpoint why one performer's material works and another's does not, Keillor said.

"I've never, in my experience, ever found anybody who made much sense in analyzing what excites or moves an audience," he said. "I don't believe anyone knows. I've never felt that I was any closer to understanding it or knowing anything about it."

Since there is no market research that he can apply to his material to know if it will work, Keillor said that he just tries to please himself.

Just what exactly is in the elixir that the airwaves' 'Dr. Feelgood' dispenses?



Chet Atkins

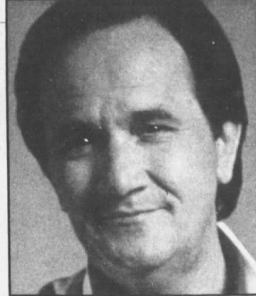
"What I think about is...amusing myself, and I think that works for someone like myself, who deals with humor in an off-center way," he said. "As you get older, you think more and more about having a good time."

"More than thinking about the audience, I think about what things I'm going to actually be doing."

Keillor's greatest success was with his public radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, headquartered in St. Paul, Minn., which ended in 1987.

He got the idea for the show while writing a magazine article for *The New Yorker* in 1974 about the Grand Ole Opry, and 13 years later, when Keillor folded it, *Prairie Home Companion* had a national audience of about 5 million listeners.

Subsequently he took a break, went to Denmark — where his wife is from —



Roger Miller

and returned to live in New York.

There he pursued his writing career. He has published four books and still writes regularly for *The New Yorker*.

"It's a wonderful magazine," he said.

"I write a 'Talk of the Town' piece about once a month, or whenever they tell me to, and beyond that I'm on my own."

In November 1989, he returned to public radio with the *American Radio Company* broadcast from the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

"It seemed odd to people that after ending *A Prairie Home Companion*, a year passed and I jumped right back in, but I work and this is the work I do," he said.

He has no trouble keeping his print and radio material separate, he said. A piece either is good in print, or on the radio, but rarely works both ways.

"A monologue is not a story or an essay," Keillor said. "In print, it would look a little faint and simple, but it's something that's nice to get up in front of people and do."

"Radio drama also is like that, and will only work with a live audience. It's not something you can go into a studio and tape."

In the old days of radio, Keillor recalled, audiences used to line up to get into the studio before broadcast time at such places as Radio City Music Hall and they would be allowed in for free.

No more. Tickets to the broadcast Saturday are \$22 and \$25, with a special \$125 ticket for those who want choice seats and a post-broadcast reception with Keillor.

Proceeds from the \$125 tickets will be divided between TPAC's statewide arts program — Humanities Outreach in Tennessee — and local public radio station WPLN-FM.

"Twenty-two dollars is pretty steep, but there aren't any more radio shows like the old days," Keillor said, obviously making an exception for his long-running inspiration. "I wish it wasn't necessary to charge that kind of money, nor to do fund-raising on public radio stations, but it is."

Despite the change in venue from Minnesota to a radio show based in New York, Keillor has no intention of changing the location of his stories and monologues from Lake Wobegon to Manhattan.

"I have no need for New York stories," he said. "Everything I want to say I can say about Lake Wobegon."

"The show now is really more than a New York show, it's a traveling national show. When we arrive in Nashville we'll start working and the show will have a lot to do with Nashville." ■